

## BUDDHISM FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

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**T**here is no doubt at all that Buddhism is needed in the modern world even though it was proclaimed more than 2500 years ago. It is because its message is ageless. It tells of loving kindness, compassion, joy and peace. Peace is one quality which the world is now talking about, and which is most desired by world leaders and organisations alike. Yet, there are still a vast number of people who are not sure at all of this message proclaimed by the Buddha.

This message of peace, and of love and happiness to all living beings was preached at a period when continents were divided by barriers – physical and geographical, linguistic and racial. Geographical isolation, slow and limited communication restricted the areas. As such, superstition was rife and knowledge was not shared. In such a situation, the unknown therefore

surpassed the known. Technically and scientifically, the presently developed areas of the modern world were not developed or even under-developed. Therefore, the people living in those extensive continents had no opportunity to hear, know, and to understand even the essentials of the message of the Buddha.

Another factor against the spread of the Buddha's message was the then prevalent method of propagating a religion. Religion was then spread by the sword and by conquest. Compared to this, Buddhism was the one religion that commissioned no lethal force nor crusading armies for its propagation.

Yet for all these factors Buddhism spread steadily to all the countries which India had communications and contacts with at that time. It spread slowly but surely along the ancient travel routes to Tibet, China, Korea, Japan and Central Turkistan. Emperor Asoka also sent Buddhist Missions to kingdoms in the East and West through Buddhist monks and disciples. He sent a gift of Dhamma to Sri Lanka through his son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta. A sapling of the Bodhi tree (*ficus religiosa*) under which the Buddha attained full Enlightenment was brought to Sri Lanka by Sanghamitta. This tree survives to this day as the oldest historical tree in the whole world. It is a symbol of enlightenment to all Buddhists. From Sri Lanka and India, Buddhism was taken to Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia.

Today the world has shrunk in dimensions. The

under-developed and the undeveloped have become technically and scientifically advanced while once developed lands have become the under-developed areas. In this era travel is easy, quick and unrestricted. Communications are instantaneous. Hence the wealth of knowledge is everyone's common heritage, and there is no reason for them to be in ignorance of the Buddha's message.

### **Criticisms**

Yet, even with the knowledge at everyone's disposal, there are still criticisms against Buddhism as well as misconceptions and misunderstandings towards the teachings of the Buddha. There are learned people who try to equate Buddhism with Hinduism. There are also eminent persons who think of Buddhism as not different from any other theistic religion. Some even say that Buddhism is full of superstitious beliefs and practices. On the surface, these appear to be contradictions that impede ideological reconciliation. These seeming differences are due more to misunderstanding, misinformation and misinterpretation of the social dynamics and cultural heritages whose intricate patterns co-exist in an unobtrusive manner in diverse societies in diverse ways. Therefore to understand the nature of the teachings of the Buddha it becomes necessary and essential to study the differences between Buddhism and any existing religion so that we can be clear about the Buddha's message.

Other religions are well planned to satisfy the psychological predispositions, questioning attitudes and curiosities of other people, their ways of thinking and believing so much so that every conceivable misgiving is provided with the best possible explanation. Some of these explanations are on a Creator's omniscience, his universal love and compassion. It is also said that some of these fundamental factors are not to be questioned. Some accept religion on blind faith, some on dogmatic theories. Nevertheless, these assumptions have satisfied the believing minds of the faithful devotees. Questioning is not for them. Logic and reason must give way to devotion. Rationalisation, scientific explanation, logical agreement differs from religion to religion. It is asserted that these methods and techniques of modern science were not intended and cannot be applied in the case of religion. Religion was thought to be fundamentally different from science. It is supposed to be a revelation, a word of god. By contrast Buddhism invites, welcomes and encourages investigation, inquiry and introspection in a logical, rational, and scientific manner. This is proven in the famous *Kalama Sutta* where the Buddha had said, "Oh, Kalamas: do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, the monk is our teacher."

It has often been said against Buddhists that they

believe in gods, accept common beliefs, worship trees and images. It is also said with disparagement that the vast majority of its adherents worship elements of heaven and earth, moon and stars. Here the critics make a mistake of mixing cultural values, social customs and traditional beliefs of people in various stages of social evolution. Either the critics forget or they do not know that Buddhism has never attempted to eliminate an existing way of life and its cultural values by a novel way of life on an unwilling person.

In a like manner, if such doubting and questioning persons, critics or observers were to ask a Buddhist individual of such Buddhist societies whether he believes in such a medley of concepts he will answer 'Yes' and 'No' because the believing person's mind is very accommodating. According to his mental make-up, there is nothing illogical in his way of thinking, in his logic and organization of the forces and elemental powers of the old and new, the unknown and mysterious. To this individual, Buddhism and its precepts stand above the substratum of the pyramid of old beliefs and superstitions with the moral codes and "*Tiratana*" (Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha) placed high on the peak of the pyramid.

One of the most consistent remarks made about Buddhism is that Buddhists have faith in the gods of their society. Such a Buddhist, when he supplicates, must not be mixed up with the real Buddhist who is seeking Nibbana. He must not be personified with Buddhism, the

Dhamma taught by the Buddha. It is a misconception of the observers and the critics with regards to the believer who is fully conscious of his pyramidal structure of his religious beliefs. He believes there are good and evil spirits; beneficent deities, and benevolent super-powers. He also believes that the Buddha occupies the highest position in that hierarchy of gods in order of rank. With his limited scientific knowledge he believes perhaps that all manner of help can be commissioned during crisis of life. Therefore, he does many things for this purpose and in relation to the realization of dire human needs during mental distress. But never has any such individual asked the Buddha and his disciples to intervene. The thinking Buddhists do not ask such favours. It is naturally understood that traditional values in certain societies formed the fundamental basis of the people's very existence and continuation. And it is also understood that every society still has remnants of its ancient traditions. Therefore it is not impossible for these traditional beliefs to be absorbed and to be practised along with Buddhism. It is the way of life.

What Buddhism did not do, other religions may have done and may attempt to do. In a zealous desire to convert, missionaries of other religions have destroyed the spirit of society and reduced them to dull and drab prototypes of an alien race and culture. Their eagerness to change the cultural values, traditional beliefs and the social patterns take the form, shape and spirit of an attempt to force an alien religion with its alien cultural

make-up on what they thought to be an inferior group. Thus, they attempted to change the socio-cultural and national spirit of a group of people. Such situations create irreparable damage socially and mentally because the missionaries have suppressed the urge to live, and in turn paralysed the will to progress. On the surface, such proselytisation may appear successful. But, in the inner regions of the people's minds the ancient beliefs and values still persist which blur all the outer light of new religions. Hence, within this society there will ensue a conflict not only of culture and race, but also of religion.

Wherever Buddhism found its way or was introduced by the Sangha (community of monks), the teachings of the Buddha were never in conflict with the traditional values of the new societies. The old and the new; the ancient and the modern co-existed side by side. As the mind progressed with the growth and advancement of knowledge, the areas of magic and superstition, medicine and science became reduced. Synthesis took place, wholly or partially, and the process continues to this day. Therefore to the superficial observer, to the die-hard critic and to the missionaries, these appear as contradictions which are irreconcilable. As a result, they condemn Buddhism out of ignorance and the difference in manner in which they view the teachings of the Buddha. They interpret the association with magic, even as a means of temporary human mechanism to satisfy a psychological tension or emotional crisis as unwarranted irreligion. And added to this is the ironical fact that

they have yet to accept that man's need for survival to attain the ultimate state of peace and happiness can only be achieved through the elimination of evil. By contrast, the Buddhist knows that all beings are impermanent, unsatisfactory and are without a soul.

### **The Understanding of Buddha's Message**

To the statement that religion is fundamentally different from scientific rationalization, we can answer through *Abhidhamma*. Basically, this higher teaching of the Buddha proceeds to the world of scientific thinking of mind and matter (*nama-rupa*). The fundamental teaching of the Buddha is **“the avoidance of evil, cultivation of good, and the purification of one's mind.”** To this is added that all component things are subject to the fundamental laws of change and impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and without a permanent living entity (*anatta*). A being is therefore nothing but *“nama-rupa”*. *Rupa* is the manifestation of forces and qualities. The ancients knew them as atoms (*paramanu*). The Buddha termed them as fundamental units of matter. From this we know that Buddhism is up to date with the latest scientific discoveries of the nature of living beings.

Birth in the Buddhist sense is termed as becoming. The process of becoming has therefore evolved in the course of time owing to ignorance in a series of causes and effects (*paticca-samuppada*). These may be formulated thus:

Because of ignorance arises volitional activities.  
 Because of volitional activities arise consciousness.  
 Because of consciousness arises mind and matter.  
 Because of mind and matter arise six senses.  
 Because of six senses arise contact.  
 Because of contact arises craving.  
 Because of craving arises attachment.  
 Because of attachment arises karma conditions.  
 Because of karma conditions arise birth.  
 Because of birth arises old age and death.

Naturally, if the cause ceases, the effect will also cease. That means, if ignorance can be completely eradicated, that will lead in stages to the cessation of birth and death.

Having explained the origin of material things, mental desires and human emotions, Buddhism attempts to explain the changing of life as one continuous cycle of being and becoming. This process is unsatisfactory. Therefore this proves that even the achievements of the highest technological advancements of the modern world are still subjected to this universal law (Dhamma). Life itself is subject to this law. No being can evade or escape it.

From this stage the Buddha then proceeded to analyse the present state of beings and to find a way to end this unsatisfactoriness and impermanence of all component things. Therefore, His message is clear. It was not one for running away in fear due to lack of human

courage and human endeavour. It is a way of finding a solution to a problem – a haunting human problem – and of knowing a way out of a dangerous situation. Such situations will always be present in the world; now and hereafter, and they can best be described by the use of a parable: Anyone enveloped by a fire can escape only by getting away from it and not by remaining within it. The way to survive a flood or to cross a river is by getting onto a raft and floating on to safety. The way to overpower a snake is to get it out of the way.

So the fire of hatred can be avoided and extinguished by love. The flood of attachment has to be overcome by detachment, and the river of '*samsara*' has to be crossed by cleansing the impurities of the mind. The sting of delusion can be removed by developing the quality of understanding. In this regard the Buddha taught one not to resort to extremes, but to follow a practical rational path which is the middle way. To keep to one extreme of suffering or the other extreme of pleasure is liable to lead a being to danger. This spiritual danger is still a prevalent feature in the modern world. It is not restricted to the ancient ages, and modern science and technology has not been able to overcome it because it deals with mental states and not the material states.

Therefore, the difficult and sure way is the middle way. This is the path of righteousness, and is also called the Noble Eightfold Path. It is an answer to our human problems. It consists of eight virtues arranged under three categories viz, morality (*sila*), concentration (*samadhi*)

and wisdom (*panna*). Under *sila* are grouped right speech, right action and right livelihood. Under *samadhi* are grouped right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. Under *panna* are classed right understanding and right thoughts. The realization of these lead to the attainment of the final state of Nibbana.

At this stage one is bound to raise the question: Why do people want to deny themselves the best things of this life – since the Noble Eightfold Path is difficult to follow? Why should they not enjoy the pleasures of the world with all its happiness? For, after death what does it matter what happens to anyone? Who knows? Who can tell? In the first place, man is a social animal. He is above all a rational being, the only single species which has enforced its full mastery over its environment; both space and outer space. Even in such a society man cannot live by himself. He has to live with his family, his group. And there can be no orderly life of happiness if everyone always lives in fear of one another.

A code of morality is therefore essential for man to live at peace in his society. Today the virtues that remain uppermost in the minds of all living beings are those moral codes preached by religious founders. And more than ever before the world is fully aware of the dangers facing advanced urban population on account of the horrors of war, racism, inequality and poverty. These are so inter-connected that one finds it difficult to separate one evil from the other. People talk of peace but they are not averse to going to war and taking life. Life is the most

precious gift of nature. There is little difference between these two species in terms of life elements. So it is hypocritical to talk of peace without talking of abstaining from taking any form of life. Why then are all living creatures excluded from this message of peace to prevent suffering? Is it because man is a super-animal and the rest lesser ones? Is it because man cannot and will not live by bread alone? Is it because man must strive or thrive at the expense of his fellow creatures? In spirit, this is the same argument affecting the minds of the leader of states trying to eliminate weaker ones; the stronger, the less strong. It is the law of the jungle, of the survival of the fittest in terms of physical, chemical and biological power.

It is the same with the other virtues: To abstain from illicit sexual gratification, to abstain from lying, and to abstain from taking intoxicants. As society evolves and as moral values become essential, the five precepts (*pancasila*) will provide the way of living for man of all present and future societies. The social rational animal must necessarily abandon the primitive way of an amoral life of the irrational beast in order to live in harmony within his society. Some will accept and adopt the moral way sooner than others. Some may do so in parts and some wholly, but in the end humanity will adopt them all. It is doing so already though not under these names but as a virtuous way of decent living.

What man really wishes for all living beings is happiness. Man, the animal, should by now have really

changed to man the moral being whose interest in his fellow beings will begin to grow. Every nation talks of peace and every person at heart desires peace for himself. But what about others near and far? Leaders talk their voices hoarse and cry out peace from all conceivable platforms. But without this very virtue being generated in the mind of the individual no man nor nation can expect peace in the community, either at home or abroad. It is a happy sign to see this quality of understanding develop in the minds and hearts of the people who have been fighting the fiercest and bloodiest of wars and nations which have acquired the most potent weapons of mass destruction. With this understanding, other virtues of loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), joy in the happiness of others (*mudita*) and a mind full of equanimity (*upekkha*) will also develop. Man can be truly great, peaceful and peace-loving only when he has cultivated these virtues and when he realises and practises them. He is then nearer to the realization of mental happiness both in this world and the next.

### **The perfect state of Buddha's Message**

The question now may be asked, why should we take all this trouble when the being has come to an end with the dissolution of the body in the world. In brief, why such pessimism? Is there a world beyond? What nature of world is it? The common answer is either heaven or hell. That may not be the final answer in Buddhism. A being does not cease becoming until he attains a perfect state of

mental happiness. This can be achieved by the attainment of the final state of cleansing the mind of all defilements, such as attachment (*raga*), ill-will (*dosa*) and ignorance (*moha*). It may be attained in this world by those who have been cultivating the mental states, leading step by step to this perfect state of beatitude. It may be in due course, during the course of becoming, when one day, becoming ceases. How can that be? And how does this operate? One's deeds can be good or bad, moral or immoral. One's mind may be developed or under-developed. One's attainments may be quick or slow. The being continues in a series of births and rebirths here or elsewhere according to his own deeds (*karma*). In accordance with the Law of Karma a being is reborn in the course of transmigration (*samsara*). This continuance of life, of mind and matter, this state of mental flux due to karmic force and effect reproduces this being in a series of lives. The process of mental purification should continue. The stages of mental attainment should develop until the man's mind is clean and he becomes a perfect man and attains perfect peace of Nibbana.

It was stated earlier that birth and rebirth continue in this and other states through the continuation of the momentum of mental flux according to one's own deeds. This process is explained in Buddhism by the doctrine of karma and rebirth. Birth continues until the karma that helps to sustain each resultant existence ceases. The ultimate cessation of birth brings about the perfect state of happiness called Nibbana in Buddhism. This way of life

so far outlined can be followed in this life both in the advanced and less advanced societies alike. But this desire of becoming leads no being to ultimate happiness. The being must cease to become. That should be the ultimate aim and objective of every being. It is the goal of a Buddhist and he practises the moral code in this hope and for this purpose. The state is within the grasp of everyone. It has to be realized by oneself.

Here the laymen and particularly those of the West come up against problems unfamiliar to them, their philosophy of life and their accustomed religion. It is the idea of life after death in a series of rebirths in a variety of forms. Can such a thing be possible? But the Western thinker and the Western mind can now, better than previously, feel that such a thing is not impossible. Certain happenings and certain misfortunes in this existence cannot be explained except by such a belief. Certain aptitudes of children at an abnormally young age cannot be explained altogether. So far only transmission of aptitudes through heredity can provide an answer. But the recollection or any remembrance of certain incidents narrated by children present a problem for which a possible explanation may be rebirth. The parapsychologists are studying this phenomenon and the number of cases recorded is increasing. It is of course stated in Buddhism that the knowledge to recollect previous existence (*pubbe nivasanussatinana*) is attained during the 3rd stage of meditation by the person who has attained the five kinds of knowledge (*panca abhinna*). So

far, those who find it difficult to believe and grasp have found some evidence of practical possibility in rebirth.

What about the operative mechanism of this doctrine of rebirth? Karmic potential of the righteous sort or the evil sort is posited as the regenerating power and as the determinant of the continuum of the life cycle. It is not an equation in which the good and evil get cancelled as plus and minus elements, leaving a sum to the debit or credit account. It is a concept whereby the good deed will, somewhere, somehow, someday at sometime get its pleasant reward; likewise the evil deed will get its unpleasant reward. The transmission of this potential karmic force has a medium which is psychic and not physical. It is a psychic process like electrical energy in an electronic device. Its power to reproduce itself is inherent in the very force itself, like electric energy or sound and light waves. Here the particular sound wave or virtual ray of light has within it the entire potential for reproduction of itself if the proper setting is just right to receive it. Perhaps karmic force in action may be explained somewhat like this in ordinary language. The last and final equation is the identity of the karmic force which reproduced the effect, i.e. the resultant new being during the stages of the continuum of life. What about its identity? How can this be explained?

These are problems that must find an answer. The layman finds it more difficult to reconcile these elements. And the laymen of the developing and not so developed world find it even more difficult to believe it is possible.

It has to be stated that these are philosophical concepts, religious doctrines which have been discussed, debated and commented upon. An explanation of certain simple things is not possible unless actually realized or experienced by oneself. Light can be explained easily. But a blind man will find it almost impossible to say what it is like. One can describe the way and the means to go to a place. One can even describe what the place is like if one has been there. But no one can feel it or realize it unless one has been there oneself. Likewise, these things are to be realized by the individual for himself and by himself. Buddhism has stated the path preached by the Buddha. It has been explained. Others can be enjoined to follow. Beyond that no one can help. One is one's own saviour. No one can save another. "*Attahi attano natho*". When one has followed the path, practised the religion, and developed the mind, one cannot fail to attain that perfect and highest state of Nibbana. That state is still within our reach. ■